

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 2:3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The Third Instance: WHEN YOU'RE ADMONISHED BY A SAGE

People in search of spiritual excellence would have to be students and lovers of truth. After all, they've come upon perhaps the greatest truism of all-- that a life of spiritual content and devotion is what matters most. It follows then that those good souls are also open to more and more truth all the time. Since the life they've decided to live is nourished by it.

But as the expression goes, indeed oftentimes "the truth hurts". And it sometimes saddens. At bottom, the *ultimate* truth bouys, envelops, and gladdens. But many of the facts that face us all along the way to the ultimate truth can hurt.

After all, in truth, most of us are oftentimes selfish, insensitive, and malignant to degrees. To be sure, we're also capable of sweetness perhaps, and of empathy and great generosity. But the person of truth, who knows his or her thumping heart only too well, couldn't deny the great and mighty waves of childishness that overtake him or her more often than it's comfortable to admit to.

That being so, what are we to do? What will ever convince our hearts of stone to soften more frequently?

Rabbeinu Yonah suggests we make use of the greatest of all senses-- hearing. And that we hear out the words of constructive criticism the wise would offer us. And that if we're truly and deep-down receptive to what they say, we'll be moved to teshuva (to closeness to G-d).

Let's step back a moment, though, and consider the idea that the sense of hearing is the most important sense, over and above seeing, tasting, touching, and speaking. After all, aren't they all capable of allowing for greatness on our parts? And wouldn't the student of Torah expect the sense of seeing to be paramount, since it enables us to study Torah?

Rabbeinu Yonah's point is that hearing is the most significant sense of them all-- in our search for spiritual excellence-- becomes its effects run deeper than the effects of all the other senses. And they touch the heart most lastingly. Anyone who has ever attended a traditional "mussar shmooze" knows only too well how true that can be (a "mussar shmooze" is heart-based public plea for betterment based on traditional sources and touching upon issues of the day).

For while studying and dwelling upon the many alternating sweet and daunting classical mussar works either on one's own with others certain does a lot to effect one's progress, it can't compare

with hearing a good "shmooze". For the sensitive soul couldn't help but catch the speaker's nuances, inflections, and sincerity. And all that is what fixes the subject spoken of right into the heart.

There's another point to be touched upon in our day and age. Which is that most of us simply know of no sages. We know of clever folks, or perhaps of geniuses and brilliant, brilliant minds. But few sages. Which is to say, we know of few souls rich in wisdom and brimming with revelation. So the few among us who know of one or two would do well to seek them out as often as possible, and take their words to heart.

In fact we're told that "if you listen and internalize, understand in your heart and do teshuvah" when the wise implore you to; you take their words "to heart as soon as you hear them"; and you "take it upon yourself to fulfill (their words) from that day onward"-- you'll "become a whole other person."

But there's another edge to that sword. Which is the fact that if hear what the wise have to say, and you come to know how true they are-- yet you still and all don't grow and change from the experience... you're exposure to such insight and wisdom would prove to be your undoing. Since you'd have come to know, and you scoffed; you'd have been granted insight, and you shrugged it off. And you'd indeed have gone from high spiritual potential to the sort of spiritual mediocrity those who sputter and quote high truths by rote and don't live by their words exhibit all their lives.

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